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A Mortal Agency: Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*

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In addition to showing how politically oriented Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds remains despite its playful exterior, this essay constitutes an extended reflection on issues of power and agency within the postcolonial Irish context. It demonstrates that Irish identity is constructed and controlled via a god-like architecture of temporal and discursive surveillance. Second, it argues for an agency that does not simply place the subaltern in a new tower, but for one that displaces the panoptical structure. Such a displacement is grounded in a mortal agency, an agency that does not recreate god-like Cartesian subjects, but emphasizes proximity and relation to one another. O'Brien's text—full as it is of strange and disparate odds and ends—becomes the ultimate exemplar of this relation.

Keywords: Flann O'Brien / agency / surveillance / postcolonial

While Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* may be especially renowned for its humor and postmodern play, its comedy and experimentation should be understood as an incisive political response to the oppressive gaze of another. This gaze is unmistakably indicated in O'Brien's discarded titles, *Through the Angel's Eyelid* and *Task-Master's Eye* (Cronin 87). *At Swim* testifies to the particular problems of Ireland in the 1930s and deserves to be read as an incisive analysis of “soft” colonial oppression—the ideological control that operates through England's books and publishing houses. I argue that colonial power is sustained most crucially through a god-like surveillance which governs the temporal and, more importantly, the discursive world of the colonized. While the text offers some traditional agential options to this control, it also puts forward what some might very well consider a non-agency—or conversely, an “agency” grounded in mortality.

Between conversations with friends and fierce confrontations with his uncle, *At Swim*'s unnamed narrator pieces together a novel about Dermot Trellis, who also happens to be a novelist. The latter is writing a novel whose characters then rebel against him in a manner parallel with the narrator's familial rebellion. As his name suggests, Trellis links all the disparate parts of the novel. We see Trellis's panoptic position when he “compel[s] his characters to live with him in the Red

Swan Hotel so that he can keep an *eye* on them" (47, 86, 139; my emphasis). As with Foucault's plague-stricken town, "Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment" (*Discipline* 195). The Red Swan Hotel simultaneously recalls Shakespeare as the Swan of Avon, Shakespeare's unique literary production which mirrors Trellis's own genius for creating characters, and the traditional linkage of Great Britain with the color red (O'Brien 34, 54). At several points, Trellis's eyes are described as "sentries in red watchtowers" that collect "intelligence" (248, 238). In this one image of a writer in a watchtower, O'Brien brings together two concepts, time and surveillance, which will be crucial to what follows.

Jeremy Bentham's panopticon — to which Foucault's work owes much — consists of a tower surrounded by cells within which prisoners are clearly visible in any position and at all times. One of the most crucial elements of Bentham's tower was the addition of blinds. By adding blinds to the tower, the prisoners are never certain if they are being watched. The guard mimics omniscience, but also invisibility. The disembodied guard becomes god-like. The blinds create a sense in the prisoners of constantly being watched when in fact that is impossible. "Hence," Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, "the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). O'Brien deals with this panoptic power structure at several levels in his text. At various moments, it becomes clear that Trellis as well as Ronan, and, finally, the Good Fairy all inhabit the tower. For the moment, I hope simply to show how discursive control is bound up in Trellis's god-like position-taking.

Trellis's Shakespeare-like power is not limited to surveillance but is also discursive. His connection with Shakespeare reminds us of canonical authors' role in propagating "colonial images and ideals" throughout the empire (Boehmer 14). His didactic novel-in-progress on societal sins both affirms the political order and discursively writes Irish subjectivity. In league with the status quo, Trellis is part of Foucault's disciplining regime whose ultimate goal, maximum economic productivity, depends on education and the improvement of "public morality" (*Discipline* 208). Early on the narrator, while informing a friend of his artistic principles, states that a "novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic" (33). The novel he envisions would be a "self-evident sham" in which characters were not forced to be "uniformly good or bad." Characters should, he says, possess a "private life, self-determination, and a decent standard of living." Of course, Trellis's art restricts free will and his exclusive preference for books with green binding marks him out as an "orientalist" intent on constructing Ireland.

O'Brien almost obsessively disliked publishers and biographers, especially "the type of biography that lifts the veil, hacks down the elaborate facades one has spent a lifetime in erecting — that is horrible" (Clissman 3). He saw capitalism as central to the question of representation. Once the Irish made the move from savage to quaint in the minds of the British public, the "snake-like eye of London publishers" began compelling Irish writers to "play . . . up to the foreigner, putting up the witty

celtic act" (qtd. in Esty 29). Publishing perpetuates British hegemony through the reproduction of stereotypes. Trellis, then, serves as a representation of hegemonic publishing practices grounded in England. As such, his novel will make money, improve public morality (while titillating his readers), and continue the discursive construction of Irish identity—all part of the colonial package.

Ultimately, Trellis's discursive power needs to be understood as grounded in his panoptical position: only someone at such a height and with such critical distance may presume to rationalize a world of otherness. Foucault writes of how surveillance and writing are inextricably connected:

This enclosed, segmented space, *observed* at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a *fixed* place, in which the slight movements are supervised, in which all events are *recorded*, in which an uninterrupted work of *writing* links the centre and periphery . . . all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (*Discipline* 197; my emphasis)

Fixity is essential to a Cartesian subject's identity as it implies that things do not change and, therefore, should not be questioned. This passage describes the complex manner in which information gleaned from sight and organized through writing substantiates a status quo, fixed reality. The narrator's desire for a more democratic novel would begin when this god-like rationalization and fixity are seen for the shams they are, that is, totally arbitrary. Returning to Trellis's description as a sentry in a red watchtower, here are the first sensations of one of his literary/discursive creations. Please note the linkage among discourse, panoptical vision, and time:

He heard the measured beat of a good quality *time-piece* coming from the center of the cloud and then the form of a chamber-pot was evidenced to his gaze, hanging without support and invested with a pallid and indeed ghostly aspect . . . A voice came from the interior of the cloud.

Are you there, Furriskey? it asked. Furriskey experienced the emotion of fear which distorted *for a time* the character of his face. (68; my emphasis)

This scene, with Furriskey's fear of the voice emanating from the cloud, echoes God's address to Moses in Exodus (19:9). Furriskey's first moments of life are described as "bewilder[ing]" as he is "consumed by doubts as to his own identity" (57–59). He resolves these doubts only through the "sensory perception of his ten fingers" on his face (which Trellis has written on in Braille). Lamont, an employee of Trellis, ". . . was [then] kind enough to produce his costly fifteen-jewel hunter watch and permit Mr. Furriskey to appraise the character of his countenance on the polish of its inner lid" (72–73). In a very basic way, what one sees here is a newborn who finds his identity by fitting into the temporal and discursive categories—Bentham's cells—created by an oppressive other, Trellis, and everything he represents.

Temporality is a subset of writing, understood in a general post-structuralist sense, insofar as it also is a means of ordering or dispelling otherness. Having said that, consider the way in which temporality was viewed in the historical context

of the novel. This will allow us better to consider the interconnectedness of time, technology, and British hegemony. Relational time—the idea of time as related to events such as birth and death—was the traditional view for centuries. British industrial ascendancy, however, prompted the evolution of time as a “conceptual tool designed to fill various practical purposes” (Lundmark 45; O’Brien 42). Telling time in relation to the sun began dying out in large cities as the public increasingly switched to clocks and absolute time. Absolute time—time that exists separate from a relation to events as theorized by Isaac Newton—was required as a reference point (in addition to absolute space) to specify the movements of forces in nature. Soon the use of clocks became “common-sense,” and was needed for such things as train schedules (57–59). In England there was some rancor, especially in the west, over the implementation of Standard Time. Clergy in other parts of the world argued that there was such a thing as “God’s time” and that Standard Time was an “abomination.” Standard Time was quickly linked with the loss of traditional values and with the growing power of railroads. When Germany ushered in Daylight Savings Time in 1916, other industrialized nations swiftly followed suit out of war-time fear (60–62).

According to Lennart Lundmark, time should be understood as an “attempt . . . to order a surrounding reality filled with a confusing multitude of events” (62). Time becomes a means of subject formation as subjectivity necessarily becomes more coherent as relation is dispelled. The earlier trope of the clock within the cloud then symbolizes the displacement of relation by a mechanized, alienated, and industrial nationalism as seen in Britain’s colonial practices. Within the biblical cloud and at the hands of Trellis, Furriskey’s creation occurs in/on British time, a time born of a practical purpose as Foucault testified, both economic and subject-forming. Trellis’s psycho-eugenic creation of Furriskey, for example, conforms to the cartoon caricature of the ape-like Irishman, but with an interesting difference: Furriskey bears a marked aptitude for mathematics, indicating Trellis’s preference for a “living mammal” who can navigate industrial society (O’Brien 55). Like the clock that sits on the window ledge in Trellis’s room, absolute time asks for “servile” human clocks whose “twin alarming gongs could be found if looked for behind the dust-laden books on the mantelpiece” (42).

Britain, as manifested in Trellis, creates an “order” through time that stabilizes the colonial chaos surrounding the colonial elite (Lundmark 62). The clock within the cloud, which had once signified the time to be in relation with God and others, subverts relation through its creation of arbitrary temporal borders. The colonial power supplants “God’s time” for its own purposes, only to inscribe itself and absolute time into a relational world vis-à-vis Ireland. But this is probably a bit too simple: It is more accurate to say that relation, itself, has been supplanted. Inserting a clock in the place of God, a clock that never responds to others around it but ticks on mindlessly, interpolating others to its schema, should not by any means be understood as a relation.

In a panoptic sense, God’s (relational) surveillance has been usurped by an equally ubiquitous technology of surveillance, entangling the colonial subject in

an impenetrable web. Such surveillance reproduces divine omniscience within an architectural (or technological) framework in which the human gazer is unseen, hidden high above, but always assumed to be present, ensuring obedience. With the common religious justification for colonization in mind, industry's metaphorical supplanting of religion takes on particular poignancy. Ireland tells its time and has its being in (non)relation to England. Furriskey enters history only through the colonial mirror, the watch that Lamont provides, becoming whole and coordinated, and attaining the germs of identity. The colonial subject receives wholeness while the colonial power, concomitantly, orders the reality in which the subject is constituted.

In the latter portion of the novel when Orlick, Trellis's son through rape, plots his father's torture, judgment, and death, he adopts the master's weapon, writing. Soon Orlick is disturbing the "flight of time" and bursting Trellis's eyeball (254–56). Orlick even writes Furriskey, Shanahan, and Lamont into their own panopticon. Written in as judges, they assume an elevated position in the courtroom where the machinations of an unjust legal system are obscured (294). Trellis becomes the defendant and a victim of the most excruciating tortures, showing explicitly how the creation of identity from without instead of from within is a torturous experience. The characters appear to understand the source of Trellis's power, but, unfortunately, this awareness does not lead to a more sophisticated politics. Their projection of a new identity continues to rely on the tainted coordinates of their stereotyped identities (Fanon 94–95). When they are not Irish stereotypes, they are mimic men. Leaving one stereotype leads them inevitably to the opposite stereotype, logically possessed by the colonial power—an identity created spontaneously from the colonial power's effort to define the Irish as "other." The Irish can know themselves only in and through the aid of the other.

As the text makes clear, Trellis is the narrator's uncle. The narrator's rebellion against Trellis is encapsulated in the creation of a novel of supposedly self-determining characters (O'Brien 33). If the "entire corpus" of literature could be available for authors and, by extension, readers, to choose characters (or identities), the unconscious reliance on essentialized notions of identity could end, he argues. The "despotic" author (or jailer) would be no more. The text would no longer naively represent reality, but would ostentatiously point to the arbitrariness of artistic creation, and, in true postmodern fashion, to the arbitrariness of reality. In the context of O'Brien's analysis, the narrator has stumbled upon a potent weapon. Unfortunately, the narrator ultimately fails to carry through because, as he wittily remarks in a pub, "the conclusion of your syllogism . . . is fallacious being based on licensed premises" (26). Here, however, in writing, the narrator does not realize that the premises on which identity—his own identity as a kept student—is based are also licensed. It is much easier to theorize post-identity than to live its reality. While the narrator writes of a coup in the king's court, his writing is intimately related, licensed, to his actual life. As Orlick's writing progresses, Trellis appears doomed, until the narrator receives the uncle's gift of reconciliation, a watch, as reward for his college success.

As the narrator leaves his uncle, the Angelus sounds in the background (312). Thomas Shea indicates that an early draft had the bell sounding from *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the place of Sweeney's original conversion (76). Etymologically, the "Angelus" links religion (Angel) and England (Anglo-Saxon) with colonial surveillance. Bells ring several times in the book, calling the idle back to their duties, and to their time schedules (45, 62, 143). While O'Brien's deletion of Sweeney's conversion at *At Swim-Two-Birds* signifies the validity of Sweeney's protest against the church (and the colonial power behind the church), the narrator's acceptance of the watch and the simultaneous sounding of the bell signal his failure: his writing and sloth never radically destabilize the system. Consequently, the narrator's writing turns conservative. He has Trellis's maid burn the pages that contain the latter's story. This destroys the fiction that created Orlick and frees Trellis to return, shaken, to his room where he implies that he will be doing much less writing in the future (313). Between the dense imagery of the watch, bell, and leniency toward Trellis, the narrator's subjection is complete, acting as a tidy lesson in colonial power tactics.

* * *

Oppression and attempts at agency are enacted on each level of the novel, but perhaps nowhere more intriguingly than in the case of Sweeney, who is ultimately able to insert himself into the panoptic position. Finn MacCool is speaking of Sweeney and himself when he berates the writers of the world—who, I am arguing, are part of the disciplining power—for their treatment of Ireland: "Who but a story-teller would dishonour [me]?" (O'Brien 25). Finn then relates the tale of Sweeney's fall from the throne *Dal Araidhe* into "madness." It all begins when he hears a priest, Ronan, "taping out the wall-steads" for a new church and ringing his bell on Sweeney's "territory," as another translation informs us (O'Brien 90–92; O'Keeffe 3). In a frenzy, Sweeney rushes out of his home, attacks the priest, throws the priest's psalter into a lake, and then attempts to douse the priest. Ronan is given a reprieve when a message arrives for Sweeney from the front.

Ronan is praised as "generous," "friendly," and as a "shield against evil" two short paragraphs before the messenger's interruption is described as an "evil destiny." In the space of a few sentences Ronan curses Sweeney and engages in "joyous piety." J.G. O'Keeffe's and Seamus Heaney's translations include neither the phrase "evil destiny" nor anything similar. Nor is there any indication that Sweeney will drown Ronan as he drags him through the church (O'Keeffe 5; Heaney 4). Heaney notes that "the literary imagination which fastened upon [Sweeney] as an image was clearly in the grip of a tension between the newly dominant Christian ethos and the older, recalcitrant Celtic temperament" ("Introduction"). O'Brien's divergences from Heaney and O'Keeffe's more straightforward translations foreground this post-colonial reading in which England and the church are wed. Ronan is also a "story-teller" who, like Trellis and every competent tale-teller, carries his book (psalter) with him. With the omnipresence of God in the background, the construction of a church on what was Sweeney's territory may be understood as a prototypical panopticon.

Later, after Sweeny injures one of Ronan's psalmists and breaks his "holy bell" with a spear during a temporary truce, the priest again curses the king (O'Brien 91). So powerful is the combination of these curses that when the battle begins, Sweeny "was beleaguered by an anger and a darkness, and fury . . . and with a disgust for the places that he knew" (92). Sweeny recognizes the disciplining nature of the church's construction but is powerless against the discursive power of the Word. Like Nebuchadnezzar, Sweeny wanders the land, eating "green-topped water-cress" and competing with other madmen over Glen Bolcain's "fine couches" (94). Eventually, he grows feathers, an incarnation of the wild goose, or Irish exile motif (117). Though as a rule successful in escaping society's attempt to entrap him, when captured, Sweeny is "hand-cuff[ed]" and "manacled" like an anarchist (97–98). He is constantly "besieged" by the disciplining officials of family and church who are intent on discursively capturing him:

Your arrival here is surely welcome, Sweeny, he [Saint Moling] said, for it is destined that you should end your life here, and leave the story of your history here and be buried in the churchyard beyant . . . you will come to me each evening the way I can write your story. (125)

"Idleness is rebellion," Foucault writes in *Madness and Civilization* (56). Sweeny's insanity was solely the madness of the excluded. Sweeny was mad only insofar as he rejected the growing ethos of Christianity; his idleness, for that reason, was a definitive protest against the world's rigid temporality. Engaged in the construction of a church, Ronan symbolizes not simply the new "Christian ethos," industry, and colonial practices, but also the fallen state of humanity and of Ireland. Foucault writes, "If it is true that labor is not inscribed among the laws of nature, it is enveloped in the order of the fallen world" (*Madness* 56). Sweeny's action marks him as a representative of the pre-fallen world. Naked, angry, and clearly idle before Ronan, Sweeny is in the perfect position to be labeled mad, for Ronan's curse is the naming (or writing) of a condition. It would be difficult to put it more elegantly than Shanahan: "There was a curse—a malediction—put down in the *book* against him. The upshot is that your man becomes a bloody bird" (118; my emphasis).

As Foucault argues, the act of defining madness is a means of control (*Madness* 35). In the classical age, the church, allied with government, used "confinement" or prisons to dominate society, eliminating public "agitation" and unemployment (54). Often it was not the insane alone who endured the close spaces of such places as the *Hôpital Général* in Paris, but also "those condemned by common law, young men who disturbed their families' peace or who squandered their goods, people without profession" (45). Interestingly, the first such hospitals in England originated in the country's most industrialized cities, places like Worcester and Bristol, where patients would frequently work (51). The condition Ronan dictates has as much to do with controlling and monitoring Sweeny's otherness as it has to do with his "insanity."

Along with Sweeny's rejection of labor and responsibility, Sweeny threatens the panoptical architecture of colonialism in a more direct way. When the party

led by the Pooka and the Good Fairy stumble upon Sweeny, the latter immediately accuses Sweeny of drunkenness (181–83). But Sweeny is sober enough to speak to them in verse:

Though my flittings are unnumbered,
My clothing to-day is scarce,
I personally *maintain my watch*
On the tops of mountains. (my emphasis)

Not only does Sweeny never sleep or work, he makes his home in trees and watches “on the tops of mountains.” Such is his threat that the invisible Good Fairy—the epitome of omniscience and omnipresence—tells the others to “Put green moss in his mouth . . . are we going to spend the rest of our lives in this place listening to talk the like of that?” It is his positioning, his idleness, and his story telling that together threaten, but do not endanger the system that substantiates the fairy’s identity and position in the panopticon.

Moments of agency within the text typically reproduce binary oppositions, instigating violence for violence as everyone tries to place themselves in the place of divinity. Orlick, for example, makes Trellis relive his torture and Sweeny places himself squarely in the panoptical position. Such agency does little to displace the system of oppression. Arguably, such agential oppositions augment the system. If agency is commonly understood as the substantiation of an oppressed subjectivity against an oppressive subjectivity, O’Brien’s text ultimately rejects such a view.

* * *

A more nuanced agency does not appear until the Pooka MacPhellimey, a devil out of Irish folklore, confronts the Good Fairy (171). While O’Brien changed the fairy’s name from “Angel” to evade possible trouble with the church, references to its angelic nature remain (149, 156, 160). The fairy is invisible and all-seeing (160). Allied with the Trellis cohort, the Good Fairy exemplifies the panopticon whose efficacy relies on the illusion of omniscience. Just as the fairy represents the church, England (*Anglo*-Saxon), and surveillance, the pooka, as a “devil,” stands in for the opposite traits (as long as this opposition is not understood as an opposition of the same at an essential level). In their first encounter the fairy remarks that “I could see through my eye-lids if I shut my eyes” (160). The pooka, naturally, deliberately abstains from “an exhaustive exercise of . . . vision” (147). This question of surveillance is immediately tied to industry when the fairy materializes in the pooka’s coat pocket, a coat “made in the old days” before “cheap factory-machined clothing” (160–61). The pooka explains that Good Fairy will not be able to see through this material because “there is better stuff in that coat . . . than was ever in any angel’s eye-lid.”

In fact, some of those present at the poker game in which Orlick’s fate for good (the fairy) or evil (the pooka) is decided attempt to exclude the fairy precisely because it has “no face.” The pooka responds:

The charge of cheating or defaulting at cards is a vile one and a charge that cannot be lightly leveled in the present company. In every civilized community it is necessary that the persons comprising it shall accept one another at their face value as honest men until the contrary is proved . . .

Take the cards if you want them, snapped Shorty, and talk about face value, that fellow has no face. By God, it's a poor man that hasn't that much. (199)

Shorty correctly surmises that playing any "game," whether of poker, publishing, politics, or business, with a faceless character who can easily see your cards is foolhardy. He suggests that humanity, as opposed to divinity, is embodied in a face. While the Good Fairy does not materialize into a "face," for the pooka he does possess a "face value." And it is the nature of this face value that allows us to locate the most radical moment of "agency" in O'Brien's novel.

Agency is indicated primarily through the blurring of the eye of the fairy, who is, once again, within the dark confines of the pooka's coat pocket: "The light is very bad in here, said the Good Fairy, I can hardly see my cards at all" (200). Soon, the fairy's hearing fades and ultimately the fairy—who never loses—finds himself bested by the pooka. The importance of this win cannot be understated. Since the fairy has no money, he has to give up his right to influence the newborn Orlick for heaven, freeing the pooka to work his will (204). This sets up Orlick's eventual revolt against Trellis which—though an agential failure ultimately for the above reasons—alarms him enough that he takes a break from his writing.

Unlike the moment described above in which Sweeny takes up a panoptical position on a mountain, everyone who is participating in the poker game is restricted to the local, particular level of mortal humans. Agency—ultimately found in the displacement of the entire panoptic system—then can be understood first of all as a product of positioning. The fairy's position in the pooka's pocket makes it an equal part of the poker circle. The fairy is no longer outside, above, or impossible to place, and this disables its divine power. This could be understood as a movement from invisibility to embodiment as the Good Fairy is now on parade for all to "see"—weak, mortal, blind. Additionally, we should remember that the poker game is bounded by Orlick's incipient birth. In the body of Orlick we must "recognize" the sightless, mortal beings that we all are.

I have been at pains to show how a particular panoptical positioning on the part of British publishing firms is the foundation for discursive control. At this particular moment when the tower has not so much been taken as dismantled, it should be no surprise that someone tells a story. The pooka relates an old Irish legend in which "Dermot" (*i.e.*, Trellis, though, yes, a different character) steals Finn MacCool's "woman," Granya. The pooka tells how Dermot and Granya take shelter in his cave and then how Dermot and he play a game of chess for Granya. The pooka's eventual checkmate of Dermot coincides with his "checkmate" of the fairy at cards.

While previously the fairy had attempted to stop Sweeny's tale-telling, here the Good Fairy is, if not muted, at least quieted (183). The telling of "authentic"

Irish stories is a response to the oppressive and one-sided telling of the Irish story from the point of view of the colonizer. It is no accident that the pooka's story reinserts Dermot ("Trellis") into an Irish story in which the latter, a figure for England, loses to the Irish. Writing back to empire in the context of the narrator's theory of writing described earlier makes colonial assimilation of the other both more difficult and more labored. I would like to emphasize within the context of the central image of power in the text—the panoptical position of the colonizer—that this story telling is not universal, but finite and limited. The position within the circle indicates that any story must necessarily remain finite and will not be able to assimilate the world and its others to a simple authoritative narrative. A tower guard is distant and, therefore, out of relation with the others below. Here, the two parties are thrown closely together. It is messy, a little tense, but there is relation and no unfair advantage.

Novels typically yearn for coherence, for wholeness, and, above all, for an oppressive status-quo, praxis-reinforcing sense. The text of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, by contrast, serves no such ideological purpose. This bulky thing, this "novel," if novel it is, does not do (change, motivate, [re]present, project) anything (simply). The "novel" is woven together with a nonsensical number of strands—mythic, folkloric, and contemporary (circa 1939)—and can, by no means, be thought of as an integrated whole. The "Author" himself—otherwise known as Flann O'Brien, Brian O'Nolan, or Myles na gCopaleen—needed assistance in editing this confusing sheaf of odds and ends. "O'Brien" did not abstract himself from the world and begin the god-like task of isolating, cutting, sorting "his" text, but remained at the level of that text, leaving his "work" a jumble of relations—a jumble that the mildly baroque prose of this paragraph can only gesture toward.

At Swim is, then, a democratic text which does not attempt to assimilate otherness to itself, to a Babel-like category, project, or narrative. It is a mortal text that shows its face and is happy to do so. This confusion in happiness and happiness in confusion confronts each reader with the possibility that, maybe, this text's confusion should not be rationalized—should not (and cannot) be made sensible. What the reader and critic of O'Brien's text realizes is that he or she is also a text, constituted through a series of acts that are only slightly dissimilar to Trellis's "aestho-autogamy" (55). Birth is messy, impure, sordid, entirely artificial, and impossible to wrap one's mind around. If each "I" is so complexly woven, so subject to others, any hope for a panoptical assimilation of an outside reality, its others, and its texts, can be seen only for what it is, a morbid joke.

O'Brien's *At Swim* does reveal the "fiction" of the colonial panopticon's gods by inscribing them into the same circle as the colonized. Separate from their divine technology, they are finite and mortal once again. Writing is seen for what it is, the torturous, arbitrary, power-inscribed act of creating an another's identity—an act that will remain totalitarian as long as one side possesses a larger arsenal of publishing houses and the technology upon which they depend. This is true, yes, to some extent. However, it is not enough to know that the panoptical position is a fiction of God (Bozovic 11). Analysis, of the traditional sort, will recapitulate

the same oppressive structure. Rationality, after all, operates in a panoptical manner, assimilating confusion to a unitary world view and feeding off of a simple oppositional agency.

O'Brien's text, however, glories in formally undermining clear oppositions. At the very moment that one comes close to solidifying an opposition or a reading, one or another ontological level of the text slips and careens into another, leaving its readers both smiling and shrugging. This happiness in confusion and confusion in happiness inexorably resists its readers and their analyses; the question is whether we as readers have the ontological and hermeneutic nimbleness to be just to the profusion of "authors" which is/are Flann O'Brien, Brian O'Nolan, and Myles na gCopaleen.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Professors Eyal Amiran, A.C. Goodson, and David Wilson for their assistance. This essay also benefited from its presentation at the Third Conference of the Space Between (2000) and the Second International Conference of the US Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (2002).

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